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SUBJECT: "To enter the 21st century or not?" - PAS  
Yerevan hosts International Women's Forum.

1. SUMMARY: On March 21, the PAS Yerevan organized a highly successful forum in honor of International Women's Month, featuring prominent women working in the fields of international affairs, politics, business, media and law. The event drew capacity crowds and was covered by three television stations and at least five print media. PAS has received much positive feedback from the participants, who praised the embassy for organizing a unique event that addressed the critical and sensitive issue of gender in Armenia. END SUMMARY.

2. In honor of International Women's Month, PAS organized a day long "International Women's Forum" at the American University of Armenia's Business Center. Leading women working in the fields of international affairs, politics, business, media and law were invited to make presentations based on their personal experiences, take questions and engage in discussion with the audience. PAS advertised the forum through alumni, university and NGO listserves and bulletin boards and was overwhelmed with more than 200 RSVPs, a rare occurrence in Armenia. At the opening of the forum, the hall was over capacity. Many of the participants, who were about 90 percent female, traveled from the far regions of Armenia to attend.

3. Several high-level women took part in the forum. The first panel was dedicated to women working in international affairs and included the U.S. Charge d' Affaires, the British Ambassador and the Turkey Desk Officer from the Armenian MFA. The Charge opened the forum by excerpting Secretary Powell's Message on International Women's Month, highlighting the Department of State's commitment to human rights and called on those present to consider that each and every woman, no matter how modest, has a contribution to make in influencing and inspiring future generations. The British Ambassador pointed out the connection between gender equality and poverty and gave her ideas about ways to promote equality on an individual level. The Turkey Desk Officer shared several interesting statistics about Armenian women working in the MFA; women account for 28 percent of Armenian diplomats and are primarily serving at the mid-level, there are currently three women Ambassadors and women face great difficulty in securing overseas assignments where most Ambassadors prefer an all-male staff.

4. The women in politics panel featured Lydumila Harutyunyan, head of the independent, non-aligned Dignity Party, Hranush Hakobyan, a prominent Member of Parliament, and an Armenian-American professor of political science. Their presentations generated a lively debate about the need to raise and enforce an existing quota (currently 5 percent) on female representation in Parliament, the need for women to test their cultural boundaries and get more involved in politics and the role of NGOs (which are primarily dominated by women in Armenia) as incubators for political activists. Harutyunyan exhorted the women in the audience to take control and define their own role in society, ending the panel with the question: "Are we going to enter the 21st century or not?"

5. After lunch, the President of the National Press Club and the director of InterNews, an NGO that promotes media development, shared their opinion that current media programming in Armenia does not serve women's interests, prompting a discussion with the audience on whether or not media outlets should develop special content for women, with the majority of the audience opposed to softer subject matter and instead calling for programming that addresses gender issues and promotes equality.

6. A lieutenant colonel in the police, a litigation attorney, an assistant community prosecutor, a lawyer specializing in international human rights law and the head of the International Affairs Department in the Prosecutor General's office made up the women in law panel and shared their particularly interesting viewpoints as women in a line of work overwhelmingly dominated by men in Armenia. They shared their own

success stories and asserted that there are increasingly more opportunities for women in this field. Most were quite young in age and their positive outlook was very inspiring for the audience.

17. The final panel was devoted to women in business. The director of an international business training center stressed the importance of getting a solid foundation in business practices and law. The owner of a popular caf and bookstore shared her humorous wisdom on the challenges to women who want to start businesses in Armenia, noting that everyone must make the choice to either "stay under the blanket and sleep or get an education and do their best!"

18. COMMENT: This event was a great success. Hundreds of women from universities, NGOs, businesses and the government were given the opportunity to hear success stories, exchange wisdom on overcoming the strong gender discrimination that exists in Armenian culture and frankly discuss opportunities and challenges to women in Armenia. Participants told us that this was the largest such meeting on women's issues in Armenia in years and PAS received multiple expressions of appreciation for organizing it. The event generated significant and positive press exposure as three television stations and at least five print media covered the event over several days. The program effectively and publicly demonstrated the United States' commitment to promoting gender equality and human rights. END COMMENT.

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